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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of unbiased stories featuring children with disabilities as a part of presenting a multicultural perspective in elementary schools. It emphasizes that the inclusion of a multicultural perspective will help teach social acceptance rather than separation, and laments that current children's books about disabilities tell little about true experiences of people with disabilities and have had the ultimate effect of dehumanizing the people. Teachers are urged to use their creativity to provide meaningful, literature-based experiences and to promote discussion from the content of the story into other areas of the curriculum. Criteria for selecting books featuring characters with disabilities are provided and include avoiding books when characters are portrayed as clumsy, foolish, evil, or malicious, and selecting books in which people with disabilities are portrayed as individuals with similarities and differences to typical peers. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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Running Head: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ABOUT DISABILITIES

Children's Literature about Disabilities Enhancing Multicultural Education in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of unbiased stories featuring children with disabilities as part of a multicultural perspective in elementary schools. The inclusion of a multicultural perspective will help teach social acceptance rather than separation. Well-intentioned authors produce award-winning and entertaining children's books about disabilities, but tragically, there is little in their stories that tell much about the true experiences. Unfortunately, the omission of facts, and perpetuation of teaching stereotypes of people with disabilities in popular books, have the ultimate effect of dehumanizing the people. Teachers should utilize their creativity to provide literature-based experiences which become meaningful. Discussions can develop to extend the study from the content of the story into other areas of the curriculum. There are some blatant and some subtle signs to recognize as criteria for teachers, parents, librarians, or students when choosing a children's book about disabilities.

Children's Literature about Disabilities Enhancing Multicultural Education in Elementary Schools

"This is a story about a little blind girl who...." Non disabled children may find the teacher's introduction to this story alluring and would most likely predict a pitiable story full of self-limitations, maybe a miraculous recovery, and, hopefully, a seeing-eye dog. Unfortunately, the omission, misinformation, and distortion of a culture's experience in films, television, and popular books, have the ultimate effect of dehumanizing people (Charles, 1996). A responsible teacher would ask, "Why do you have to say, 'This is a blind girl's story'? Why not say, 'This is a story about a little girl who...'" (Slavin, 1997)? If the content of a story does not apply to the classroom, then do not use it. This paper is intended to describe the benefit of children's literature as a learning tool for an antibias perspective in curriculum and instruction. Specifically, literature about disabilities will be ensampled to illustrate ways to unteach generalizations about other people that leads to stereotyping, rather than understanding (Slapin, 1987).

Multicultural Education

The American educational experience today no longer works as a melting pot. Students sharing the same classroom do not share the same lifestyle. America's culturally diverse classrooms represent more of a tossed salad (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994)! Students should discover and appreciate all of the ingredients in their salad, which is the thrust of multicultural education. Effective teaching of critical thinking depends on designing a classroom that encourages the acceptance of different perspectives.

Multicultural education has become an important part of school curriculum, yet it embodies no single program, but a philosophy (Slavin, 1997). However, the programs share four main goals, including tolerance of other cultures, elimination of racism, to teach multicultural content, and to view the world with different perspectives (Spring, 1998). Banks (1993) believed that the process of cultural shaping and interaction should enrich both the teachers and students. He defines multicultural education as "an idea stating that all students, regardless of the group to which they belong, such as those related to gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion,

or exceptionality, should experience educational equality in the schools" (Banks, 1993, p. 23). The objective is to not only teach about other groups or countries, which is Banks' (1993) simplest dimension of multicultural education. The higher levels of inclusion is to teach students about knowledge construction or to think critically about their personal views and become accustomed to the idea that there are many lifestyles, languages, cultures, and perspectives. The challenge for teachers is to present an effective multicultural education foundation by means of which all children can learn to accept others (Gomez, 1991). Teachers can assess their effectiveness in achieving multicultural goals by considering the following questions (Baruth & Manning, 1992, as cited in Slavin, 1997, p. 143):

- Have there been efforts to understand and respect cultural diversity among learners not as a problem to be reckoned with, but as a challenging opportunity and a rich gift?
- Have there been efforts to provide a classroom in which learners feel free to speak and express diverse opinions?
- Do the walls, bulletin boards, and artwork of the classroom demonstrate respect for cultural diversity, or do the contents of the classroom indicate an appreciation or valuing of only one culture?
- Have there been efforts to allow (and indeed encourage) all students to work in cross-cultural groups, to carry on conversation and meaningful dialogue, and to feel a valued member of the group?
- Have there been efforts to treat each learner with respect, to consider each learner as equal to other students, and to treat each learner as a valued and worthwhile member of the class?

Educators need to respect young learner's abilities to think, speak, read, and act. Educators should respect their abilities to comprehend, construct, and communicate meanings in various contexts. These should be the aims, process, and result of education (Vandergrift, 1998).

People with certain exceptionalities can develop their own microcultures (Gollick & Chin, 1994, as cited in Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997, p. 98). Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) describe an

important aspect of multicultural special education is developing these same feelings of appreciation and understanding of cultural differences involving disabilities.

The inclusion of multicultural perspectives in education should begin in the elementary grades, when children can be taught social acceptance, rather than separation as the norm. These are crucial years in development when a sense of belonging can strongly influence future achievements. The promotion of a positive self-concept is essential, along with activities that show the similarities and differences of all children's lives. Each child should be treated as a unique individual with something special to contribute to everyone's experiences. The feeling of connection is crucial to the child's acceptance of the similarities and differences of others (Gomez, 1991).

Children's Literature in Multicultural Education

Vandergrift (1998) cleverly states that "we all need to learn about life both literally and literarily, efferently and aesthetically." One of the first ways that children make sense of what it is to be human is through meeting characters in stories. As the child wonders at the lives in the story, he or she makes connections with his or her own life and the world. A child's love for pretension and talent of imagination helps him or her reach out to see what he or she may become.

Banks (1993) suggests the use of children's literature as excellent vehicles for introducing the simple concepts of similarities, differences, prejudice, and discrimination in kindergarten and the primary grades. Through stories by children, teachers, and professional authors, characters, given life through words and pictures, enter the classroom, and in so doing they bring new life experiences and points of view (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 5). Because culture plays such an important role in the evolution of a child's sense of self, multiethnic children's books will be beneficial as they allow children to see themselves in literature (Ramirez & Ramirez, 1994). McGowen (1994) explains how children's literature can be used as a springboard to acquiring the knowledge, ability, and disposition to practice citizenship in a democratic society. Slapin (1987) summarizes these thoughts by stating, "Books open doors to ideas."

Developing Antibias Curriculum

Non disabled educators typically have been just as influenced by stereotypes prevalent in movies and television as their students. Today's educators grew up with Klara in Heidi, Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol, The Huntchback of Notre Dame, and Beauty and the Beast (Slapin, 1987). Teachers must ask themselves if they saw these characters as grotesque, evil, laughable or weird.

A common, but inappropriate, method of teaching about disabilities is the "tourist approach" as described by Almeida (1996). The tourist, or student, visits only the exotic components of life. The miseducation occurs because what students learn is not necessarily what was meant to be taught. Cultures of minority people should not be presented as entertainment, nor as painful histories of victimized peoples. This is the teaching of simplistic generalizations and leads to misunderstanding. Teachers must be aware of replacing one unrealistic portrayal of handicapped and unloved with another as beautiful and "just like you" (Slapin, 1984).

People with disabilities do develop their attitudes as an outgrowth of their experiences. Sometimes they are sensitive or compassionate or even angry or bitter. What is wrong, Slapin urges, are stories that do not "...validate the pain and oppression...; to show us as either naturally compassionate or else as angry at ourselves and not the forces which oppress us" (1987, p.8).

Once teachers begin examining their own underlying beliefs and ideologies about disabilities, then they will be better prepared to assess the knowledge and attitudes of their students. Teachers can use this knowledge to develop a curriculum that challenges students to develop multicultural education critical thinking skills.

Integrating Stories about Disabilities into the Classroom

Integration into the classroom should begin in pre-school and continue throughout the educational process. Teachers utilize various creative techniques to integrate storytelling into interdisciplinary learning. Effective teaching practices would simply be sensitive to a student's sense of self, and acquired knowledge and skills (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997).

As emphasized in the opening of this paper, the story should be of value regardless of it being about a child with a disability. These stories, like others, teach students to recognize

character growth, setting to develop a mood, theme, conflict. Also, illustration use should help communicate these ideas through color, design, setting.

Picture books can naturally be extended into the language arts curriculum. Students have the opportunity to use the vivid pictures to create their own text and interpretations. Discussions can develop to extend the study from the content of the story into other areas of the curriculum. For example, students can learn about adaptive recreational activities associated with the story being read.

The teacher must determine the level of awareness held by each student, and determine specific antibias issues of study. McGowen (1994) suggests implementing techniques such as role-playing, interviewing, and stories to begin thinking. Who Am I, by Barry Head & Jim Seguin could be a meaningful story for this theme (as cited in Slapin, 1987). Students brainstorm possible activities to pursue to fill in the gaps in knowledge of deaf people. In Who Am I, a young child with a hearing impairment goes through her day: hugging her Mom, playing with friends, participating in class. Her hearing aid is clearly visible in most pictures, and importantly, seen as ordinary. Students can discuss questions about how she lives happily with her disability, or how can the lessons be applied to their own lives. Since the story has virtually no text, the children must use visual cues to "read" the book. Students can discuss how they feel about depending on visual cues to orient themselves, similar to deaf people (Slapin, 1987).

Vandercook describes a program "to assist educators to develop a classroom community which all children feel good about themselves and work together to support the active learning and valued membership of all class members" (1993, p.7). This program called, "Lessons of Inclusion," introduces a topic using children's literature, discusses questions, and provides activities. The four lessons are: "Including Everyone: We all Need to Belong," "Liking Myself: Self-Esteem Is Important," "Making and Keeping Friends: Everybody Needs a Friend," and "Cooperating With Others: Together We Can Do It." The long-term goal of these lessons is to take the lessons of awareness and attitudes beyond the classroom walls.

Teachers should provide literature-based experiences to provide opportunities for meaningful conversation. Children's literature can encourage positive peer relationships among children of differing abilities (Gross & Ortiz, 1994). Students could share their experiences, building a classroom experience. Sharing their personal responses to books during cooperative activities can help children to understand their individual strengths and limitations. Gross and Ortiz (1994) suggest allowing children to play roles within a group to accommodate different levels of ability. Everyone shares in carrying out the project. Cooperative activities can center around a central theme of a story to create a story web (Gross & Ortiz, 1994). A story web is created by first, placing the title at the top of the web. Second, categories about information in the story (i.e. setting, characters) are placed under it, connected by lines. The teacher and students build the web together as they discuss their responses to the story, adding more and more information. Events in the web then become starting points for conversations and cooperative activities. The possibilities of study units are almost limitless. Teachers must believe in their efforts, as their values, perspectives, and teaching styles will affect what is taught and how (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997).

Resources

As the need for convenient access to good books of stories about disabilities has increased, groups have developed and published units, books, audio-visual material, games, and teacher's guides. The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities publish a bibliography, "A Guide to Children's Literature and Disability," several times a year. A large list of children's books is presented, grouped according to the following disabilities: Attention Deficit Disorder, blindness, Cerebral Palsy, deafness, Down Syndrome, Learning Disabled, severe or life-threatening conditions, physical disabilities, and Other. An indication of age or grade level is provided for each book listing (Kupper, 1994).

Slapin (1987) developed a wonderful guide evaluating children's books for "handicapism" or stereotyping. She recommended a list of 43 books for pre-Kindergarten through high school. Her guide truly illustrates how books can provide positive values, or send messages of alienation.

KIDS (Keys to Introducing Disability in Society) Project is a non-profit training and educational organization of people with disabilities (Slapin, 1987, p.34). The disabled trainers and teachers have brought inclusionary toys, games, stories, songs, books, and enthusiasm to classrooms.

Selecting Good Children's Literature about Disabilities

> "...All children need [a] pride of
> heritage and sense of history of
> their own people and of all the
> people who make up the mosaic
> of this great nation."
> -Marion Wright Edelman (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997, p.85)

However beautiful the picture book may be, a book must be rejected if it is inaccurate or disrespects the culture. Sometimes an author is well-intentioned, but a non disabled person wishing to write a story about disabilities should consult with someone who truly understands the experience (Slapin, 1987). Just as importantly, the stories should be meaningful regardless of them being of a disabled child, by being applicable to non disabled stories dealing with similar themes.

There are some blatant and some subtle choices to use as criteria for teachers, parents, librarians, or students when choosing a children's book about disabilities. The following examples are truly helpful because they tell not only what is wrong, but what to look for (Slapin, 1987, p. 7).

Blatant and hurtful errors are seen in books when disabled characters are portrayed as clumsy or foolish, evil or malicious. Instead, the characters should have individualized and complex personalities. There is typically a mood of sadness; the characters are always the recipients of pity and preoccupied with the hope of recovery. Better is a writer who can show any understanding of the complete person, relating to peers and having thoughts not related to the disability. Characters are described as beautiful or handsome, except for the disability. They can

be seen as attractive people with intimate partners. Are they "just like you" or, is each person seen as an individual with similarities and differences? It is crucial to wonder if there is anything in the story that would embarrass or hurt a disabled child. There needs to be positive roles in which a disabled child can identify.

Such an evaluation can be illustrated through a great, well respected children's book author, Eloise Greenfeld. This author writes a realistic, unsentimental story which happens to have a young girl who uses a wheelchair as the main character. The young girl in Darlene is portrayed as a member of a loving family, who plays adaptive games with her uncle while her mother is away. Darlene had been, at first, impatient for her mother to return, but changed her mind after having so much fun with her uncle. These are typical reactions of a typical girl in a typical family. She is not made to be pitied, she is allowed to change her mind whenever she wishes, rather than always having to be "good-natured" about things (Slapin, 1987).

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